SPORT

Hakimi voted African Footballer of the Year

RABAT: Morocco captain Achraf Hakimi was named African Footballer of the Year at the 2025 CAF Awards in Rabat on Wednesday, capping a season in which he lifted the UEFA Champions League with his club Paris St Germain.

The 27-year-old also won a fourth Ligue 1 title last season and claimed the French Cup and UEFA Super Cup, however PSG came up short in the final of the Club World Cup as Hakimi was forced to settle for a runners-up medal in New York.

He beat out two past winners in Liverpool's Egyptian forward Mohamed Salah and Nigeria striker Victor Osimhen to become the first defender to claim the prize in 52 years.

He is the first Moroccan to win the award since midfielder Mustapha Hadji in 1998, and the first defender since Zaire centre back Bwanga Tshimen in 1973.

Morocco's Ghizlane Chebbak claimed the prize for the best women's player, beating out compatriot Sanaa Mssoudy and Nigerian Rasheedat Ajibade.

The Al Hilal attacker was the leading scorer in the Africa Women's Cup of Nations this year.

It was a bumper day for the ceremony's host country Morocco as Yassine Bounou scooped up the best men's goalkeeper award and the Moroccan U-20 World Cup-winning side was voted best men's national team.

Watford's 20-year-old Othmane Maamma of Morocco claimed best young men's player, while compatriot Doha El Madani retained the title of best young women's player.

The Women's Goalkeeper of the Year was claimed for the third time in a row by Nigeria's Chiamaka Nnadozie.

Bubista from Cape Verde won the Coach of the Year after leading the tiny island nation to a debut appearance at the World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada next year.—Agencies

Master Paints reach main final

LAHORE: Master Paints reached the main final while HK Polo clinched a spot in the subsidiary final of the SQ Seagold Polo Cup after winning their respective matches here at the Lahore Polo Club on Thursday.

In an impressive show of the day, Master Paints first defeated Imperial Polo 4–2 and then edged past Team Balochistan 4-3 to secure a place in the main final.

HK Polo, meanwhile, secured a place in the subsidiary final

In the subsidiary qualification round, Peshawar Polo Club, Guard Group/Lotto Carpets, and HK Polo — the losing teams from the earlier pool — also competed.

HK Polo started with a 4-2 win over Peshawar Polo Club before making the subsidiary final with a convincing 5-3 triumph against Guard Group/Lotto Carpets. —Sports Reporter

ZURICH: FIFA president Gianni Infantino (L) and former Italian player Marco Materazzi pose with the 2026 FIFA World Cup trophy in front of the results of the 2026 World Cup European play-offs draw at the FIFA's Home of Football on Thursday.—AFP

Italy face Northern Ireland in European World Cup playoffs, Sweden meet Ukraine

ZURICH: Four-time World Cup winners Italy will face Northern Ireland in the European playoffs in their bid to qualify for the 2026 World Cup while Sweden meet Ukraine as 16 teams learned the pathways that determine the four remaining European slots for the global tournament.

Italy again failed to secure direct qualification after finishing second in their group as they seek to qualify for the first time since the 2014 edition.

They were knocked out in the playoffs the last two times and enter the second round as top seeds, with a potential final against either Wales or Bosnia & Herzegovina to qualify.

Northern Ireland, on the other hand, have not qualified for the World Cup since 1986 and have beaten Italy just once in 11 meetings back in 1958.

In other eye-catching matchups, war-torn Ukraine will play a star-studded Sweden team that could feature Liverpool forward Alexander Isak and Arsenal striker Viktor Gyokeres.

If the Ukrainians get past Graham Potter's side, they will face the winner of Poland's match against Albania for a place in the finals in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

The Swedes reached the World Cup quarter-finals in 2018 but did not qualify for the 2022 edition.

Denmark face North Macedonia, the minnows who famously knocked out Italy in the playoffs last time.

The Czech Republic will have a tricky task when they host the Republic of Ireland, who booked a playoff spot thanks to a late goal from Troy Parrott that earned a 3-2 win in Hungary on Sunday.

The winner of that match will host the winner of the semi-final between Denmark and North Macedonia.

Turkey have not qualified for the World Cup since they shocked the world with a third-place finish in 2002. They face Romania, who were surprise quarter-finalists the last time the tournament was played in the United States in 1994 and are seeking their first qualification since 1998.

The winner of that game will face either Slovakia or Kosovo, who are bidding to reach a World Cup for the first time in their history. Slovakia last played at the 2010 World Cup.

The 12 group runners-up from the first round were placed in Pots 1-3 and seeded based on FIFA world rankings while the four teams that advanced via the UEFA Nations League were in Pot 4.

The single-leg knockout matches will take place in March, with the semi-finals on March 26 and the finals on March 31. The higher seeded teams will host the semis while a draw was made to see who hosts each final.

IRAQ AWAIT BOLIVIA OR SURINAME IN PLAYOFF TOURNAMENT

In the inter-continental playoffs, New Caledonia — bidding to reach a World Cup for the first time — will play against Jamaica for the right to face the seeded Democratic Republic of Congo.

And Bolivia will play Suriname — another country seeking a first ever appearance at football's showpiece — with the winner going on to a winner-takes-all game against Iraq.

The six teams from the AFC, CAF, CONCACAF, CONMEBOL and the OFC confederations will play in the inter-confederation playoff tournament in Guadalajara and Monterrey in March.

Seeded teams Iraq and Congo directly advanced to the two playoff finals.

Iraq are trying to qualify for the World Cup for the first time since their debut appearance in 1986. Graham Arnold's side reached the playoffs in dramatic fashion by beating the United Arab Emirates with a penalty in the 17th minute of stoppage time for a 3-2 aggregate win.

Congo kept alive hopes of a World Cup place as they edged continental powerhouse Nigeria 4-3 on penalties after a 1-1 draw following extra time to win the African qualifying playoffs.

Jamaica failed to get the win needed over Curacao to qualify directly, leading Steve McClaren to resign as their head coach despite reaching the playoffs.

Bolivia finished seventh in the South American qualifiers, sealing the playoff spot with a shock 1-0 win over Brazil in the final round of games.

European playoff draw:

Path 'A': Semi-final 1: Italy v Northern Ireland, Semi-final 2: Wales v Bosnia & Herzegovina, Final: Winner of SF1 v Winner of SF2 (hosts).

Path 'B': Semi-final 3: Ukraine v Sweden, Semi-final 4: Poland v Albania, Final: Winner of SF3 (hosts) v Winner of SF4.

Path 'C': Semi-final 5: Turkey v Romania, Semi-final 6: Slovakia v Kosovo, Final: Winner of SF5 v Winner of SF6 (hosts).

Path 'D': Semi-final 7: Denmark v North Macedonia, Semi-final 8: Czech Republic v Ireland, Final: Winner of SF7 v Winner of SF8 (hosts).

Playoff tournament draw:

Pathway 1: Semi-final 1: New Caledonia v Jamaica, Final: Democratic Republic of Congo v Winner of SF1.

Pathway 2: Semi-final 2: Bolivia v Suriname, Final: Iraq v Winner of SF2. —Agencies

Italy cruise past Austria and into Davis Cup semi-finals

BOLOGNA: Hosts Italy stayed on course for a Davis Cup 'three-peat' with a convincing victory over Austria in Bologna on Wednesday to set up a semi-final clash against Belgium.

Italy won both of their Wednesday's singles matches against Austria in front of an enthusiastic crowd.

Matteo Berrettini and Flavio Cobolli claimed straight-sets victories, making light of the absences of star players Jannik Sinner and Lorenzo Musetti.

Sinner and Musetti withdrew from Italy's title defence on home soil but the Azzurri were dominant even without two world's top 10. players ranked in the

BOLOGNA: Italy's Matteo Berrettini hits a return against Jurij Rodionov of Austria during their Davis Cup Final 8 match at the Unipol Arena.—Reuters

Former Wimbledon finalist Berrettini, who was key to Italy retaining the Davis Cup last year, was first up in Supertennis Arena and comfortably saw off the 177th-ranked Jurij Rodionov 6-3, 7-6(7/4) in one hour and 35 minutes.

Berrettini went 5-2 down in the second set which was interrupted for half an hour due to a problem with the lighting in the arena.

But the injury-prone 29-year-old rattled off three games, saving three set points to draw level at 5-5 sending the match into the tie-break.

A double-fault by Rodionov handed Berrettini the initiative in the tiebreak and the Italian brought up a match point with a reflex volley before a big serve finished it.

"I'm really proud of how the boys managed the two matches," said team captain Filippo Volandri. "It's not news that Matteo has this character, he's made to play in these competitions... to find solutions in difficult moments."

Cobolli, ranked 22 in the world, made short work of Filip Misolic, beating Austria's highest ranked player 6-1, 6-3 to secure Italy a spot in the last four.

The 23-year-old, who won his first titles in Hamburg and Bucharest this year, breezed past Misolic in little more than an hour to the joy of the majority of the 10,000 fans present in northern Italy.

"It's definitely the best day of my life," said Cobolli. "I've always dreamed of wearing this jersey and playing for Italy, for the lads over there [his teammates], my family and my team."

Italy winning the two singles matches meant Simone Bolelli and Andrea Vavassori did not play their doubles match against Alexander Erler and Lucas Miedler. —Agencies

Veteran Curacao coach hails 'crazy' World Cup qualification

KINGSTON: Veteran coach Dick Advocaat said tiny Curacao's qualification for the World Cup is the "craziest thing" he had ever achieved in his long-standing career.

The Caribbean island of barely more than 150,000 people, which is a self-governing part of the Netherlands, became the smallest country to qualify for the World Cup when they drew with Jamaica in Kingston on Tuesday.

The 78-year-old Advocaat was not there because he had to return to the Netherlands for family reasons.

Nicknamed the Little General, he has been the national coach of eight different countries and took the Netherlands to the semi-finals of the 2004 European Championship and the World Cup quarter-finals in 1994. Now he will be the oldest coach in World Cup finals history.

"After a performance like that, you're tempted to say this is the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced, but that's short-changing so many other moments," Advocaat told the *Algemeen Dagblad* newspaper on Thursday in his first public reaction to the feat. "Its the craziest thing I've ever achieved as a coach. This is so wonderful for the island and the players who came from far away."

Advocaat watched the match on television at home in The Hague in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

"I was completely finished after the match, much more so than when I'm standing on the pitch. You can set things up exactly the way you want, but you lose all your energy. This was such an important match," he said.

"Look at Jamaica, Steve McClaren was already gone as national coach a few hours after the draw. Yet they hit the post twice and the crossbar once. And then there was the penalty."

Curacao's fairytale looked shattered in the fourth of the five minutes added on at the end of the game when substitute Jeremy Antonisse appeared to have brought down Jamaica's Isaac Hayden and the El Salvador referee Ivan Barton immediately pointed to the spot.

"Luckily, VAR intervened. That's what it's for, but you never know, right?" said Advocaat, referring to the video assistance.

The referee was encouraged by the VAR officials to check the incident on the small touchline screen and without hesitation reversed his own decision.

"You could still lose because of a moment like that. That's why I say, it's so close in football."

Advocaat took charge of Curacao in January last year and encouraged many Dutch players with Antilles roots to join the team, meaning all the players for the Jamaica clash were Dutch-born.

"We went to the craziest places in the qualifiers, we played on the worst pitches. And I kept saying that it would all come down to the last match. And that turned out to be true. But in the end, we got to where the boys dreamed: the World Cup in America," he said.—Reuters

Strikers edge Conquerors, Stars thump Invincibles

FAISALABAD: Strikers overcame Conquerors by three wickets in a last-ball thriller while Stars recorded a dominant 70-run win against Invincibles as the fourth round of the National Women's One-Day Tournament concluded here on Thursday.

Strikers registered their first win in three matches as they successfully chased down 221-run target on the last ball of their innings with three wickets in hand against Conquerors at the Iqbal Stadium.

Chasing the target, Strikers lost three quick wickets after openers Shawaal Zulfiqar (23) and Saiqa Riaz (nine) had put on 26 runs. Player-of-the-match Aliya Riaz, batting at No.5, then joined forces with Noreen Yaqoob to steer the chase with a magnificent 147-run fourth-wicket stand.

Aliya, who fell three short of her century hit 12 fours and three sixes in her 102-ball outing, while Noreen's 46 came off 87 balls with the aid of four fours and a six.

After the duo got out on the score of 194, it was No.7 Humna Bilal (17 not out) who made sure to help their team get over the line with Ghulam Fatima hitting the winning run on the last ball of the 50th over off Fatima Sana. Umm-e-Hani and Fatima dismissed two batters each.

Earlier after opting to bat first, Conquerors made 220 all out in 44.4 overs after being 158 for 3 at one point. Skipper Fatima (58 off 45, eight fours and a six) and Gull Feroza (48 off 72) had stitched an 85-run fourth-wicket partnership after their team slipped to 73-3.

For Strikers, Humna Bilal returned figures of 3-23 off eight overs while Noreen and Ghulam picked up two wickets each.

At the HPC Ground, Stars outfoxed Invincibles defending a 214-run total as Syeda Aroob Shah chipped in with two wickets and 40 runs with the bat. She was later named player-of-the-match.

This was Stars' second consecutive win after starting the tournament with a 111-run defeat to Conquerors.

After being put into bat, Stars' Sidra Amin (49) and Gull Rukh (34) came together to form a 54-run second-wicket stand after skipper Omaima Sohail's departure for two.

Invincibles' five-wicket haul star Momina Riasat (5-27) then removed Gull. Aroob walked in to bat at 120-3 and contributed 40, and was aided by No.8 Anosha Nasir (31) in helping their team cross the 200 mark.

Momina removed Aroob, Diana and then cleaned up the no.9 and 10 to bag her five-fer.

In reply, Invincibles slipped to 78-6 as Stars struck at regular intervals with only Natalia Parvaiz (63 off 77, eight fours) weathering the storm. Stars eventually folded for 144 in 37.5 overs.

Diana Baig took 3-21 off 6.5 overs while Anam Amin dismissed two batters.—Agencies

International boxing event from 26th

LAHORE: Forty-four professionals, including 38 foreigners and six Pakistanis, from 16 countries will compete during the second International Boxing Championship being held in Lahore from Nov 26 To 29.

Boxers from the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Mexico, Morocco, France, Netherlands, Argentina, Thailand, Dominican Republic, South Korea, Philippines, Ghana and Nigeria along with Pakistan will participate in the championship.

Luara Ikram, the Pakistan-born British boxer, will also participate in the event. Apart from her, Mohammad Wasim, Waqas, Asim Zaman, Mohibullah, Jania and Komal Akhlaq will also represent Pakistan in the grand event.

Leading US boxers Peter Dobson and Steve Geffrard, Mexico's Eduardo Baez and Jesus Saracho and Kevin Boakye of Germany will also participate in the competition.—Sports Reporter

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Squash Federation secretary Air Commodore (retired) Amir Nawaz (second R) reveals the trophies of International squash championship after a press conference on Thursday.—Mohammad Asim/White Star

CAS Squash from 24th

ISLAMABAD: The Chief of the Air Staff-Serena Hotels International Squash Championship will take place here at the Mushaf Squash Complex from Nov 24 to 28, Pakistan Squash Federation (PSF) secretary retired Air Commodore Amir Nawaz said on Thursday.

Speaking at a press conference here at a local hotel, Amir said that apart from seven Pakistan players some 17 world-ranking players of the Czech Republic, Egypt, Hong Kong-China, Japan, Malaysia and Switzerland had confirmed their participation in the event.

Nawaz on the occasion further said that world No. 42 Karim El Hamamy of Egypt was the top seed of the championship while world No. 43 Pakistan's Noor Zaman Pakistan was second seed.—APP